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Leadership and Professional Development Amongst Student Interns

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Leadership and Professional Development Amongst Student Interns

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Abstract

Research shows that students who participate in an on-campus internship during their time as an undergraduate can have positive impacts on their leadership and professional development (Matteo & You, 2020). The positive impact of partaking in an on-campus internship has prompted higher education professionals to investigate the specific benefits that are provided through these internship programs as well as the structure of such programs. This study sought to improve my understanding of being a mentor and how I can create space and opportunity for my student interns to work towards leadership and professional development and how those skillsets can be transferable to their intended careers. By working with health promotion student interns and conducting one-on-one interviews, journal prompts, and surveys, I was able to gain greater insight into the ways of supporting student interns and structuring internship programs that directly and positively impact their leadership and professional development. This study found that student interns who reported high levels of satisfaction with their leadership and professional development opportunities and relationships with supervisors had a more positive internship experience overall. The findings from this study can be used to implement more inclusive and available resources that aid in student's personal growth, leadership, and professional development while attending a university.

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Introduction

The time I spent in a peer advising internship during my undergraduate education was extremely impactful in my development as a student and a higher education professional. I spent the first two years at San Diego State University not knowing what my true passions or aspirations were. I was determined to narrow down the scope of my potential interests while expanding upon my professional and leadership skills in order to become well equipped to enter the job market beyond graduation. I applied for an internship to become a peer advisor at the Psychology Undergraduate Advising Office at San Diego State University, which is where I found my passion for academic advising and higher education. The experience I had as an intern prompted me to become more self-aware of how I interacted with my peers and supervisors. Serving as a peer advisor provided me with an opportunity to exercise leadership and become more aware of skills and practices I use to build relationships in order to be better prepared for my future career. While I was fortunate to find a mentor who provided me with feedback during this experience, many of my fellow interns expressed to me that they felt they were not receiving enough mentorship from the leadership team within the program, and felt they were only there to provide a service on behalf of the university. I came to the conclusion that many students do not get enough out of their on-campus leadership positions, and many programs do not adequately prepare or give students useful skills that would serve them well in their intended career path. In reflecting on this experience, I am concerned some students are leaving college without the necessary skillset so many employers find desirable in college graduates.

Leadership and problem-solving skills are consistently considered essential skillsets for students to develop by today's employers of university graduates. However, employers state that these skills are the ones most often lacking in job seekers (Thompson, 2014). There is

widespread concern that students are not leaving college with a complete understanding of themselves, or the type of career that they will find meaningful. As the nation's economy continues to be impaired by the COVID-pandemic, students who are graduating from college are uncertain if they will be able to find employment in their selected career field (Hawley et al., 2021). Students require more guidance and advising that helps incorporate opportunities to have conversations about their needs, as well as how on-campus work experience can aid them in their academic journey.

Background

During a student's time in higher education, there are various ways in which they can gain relevant experience towards their intended career while obtaining the skills that will better prepare them for their future career (Nunamaker & Cawthon, 2018). One form of relevant experience that students can engage in during their time in college is to participate in an on-campus internship. During their time in an internship, students are able to reflect on their experiences within the community and discuss their values and beliefs as it relates to their desired profession, which in turn helps them forge a professional identity (Matteo & You, 2020). When students are able to participate in an internship, they are able to strengthen their development and social skills which prepares them for the real world (Hoyle & Deschaine, 2016). Additionally, there are several competencies that students can improve upon throughout their internship. These include but are not limited to improved communication, collaboration, leadership, self-awareness, integrity and ethics, adaptability, analytical skills, and familiarity with technology (Nunamaker & Cawthon, 2018).

On-campus internships have been shown to successfully provide student interns with the opportunity to learn more about themselves and others, to become more involved in the

institution, and to promote involvement among their peers. These experiences also increase retention and allow students to build relationships with their peers as well as their supervisors (Diambra, 2003). When students are given the opportunity to participate in an internship, they are able to strengthen their development and social skills, which helps prepare them for the real world (Hoyle & Deschaine, 2016). Being an undergraduate student intern is another way for students to gain the necessary experience and relationship-building skills to enter their intended career upon graduation.

Scholars in internship programs are given an opportunity to be involved with their campus community while they explore their professional interests and make meaning of their college experiences. Additionally, they are helping their fellow peers who are also facing similar obstacles of navigating the systems of higher education. Student interns benefit when they have ongoing training and supervision from student affairs professionals, while obtaining the skills and tools necessary to work with their peers as they face their current issues. Promoting undergraduate student success and achievement is the ultimate goal of any internship program and being able to build effective relationships with peers and supervisors while navigating systems of higher education can be beneficial to a student's holistic development.

Context

I conducted my study at The University of San Diego (USD), a private, Catholic University; specifically, I completed my research with a group of students who serve as student interns for the Center of Health and Wellness Promotion (CHWP). I serve as the Graduate Assistant in the CHWP, which provides the USD community with a comprehensive array of health and wellness promotion initiatives and clinical alcohol and other drug services. The CHWP team consists of 10 individuals, including the director of health promotion, the program

coordinator of health promotion, two graduate assistants and three mental and behavioral health professionals.

In the past, the CHWP was able to hire student interns for pay, and these interns would work at the front desk of the office and engage in a lot of behind-the-scenes office work. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, USD was forced to forego hiring students for these roles since it was not possible to pay these students due to budget restraints. The CHWP was able to bring in students who wanted to participate in an academic internship in which they receive academic units towards their major while also serving as a student intern with the CHWP. This specific internship involves four undergraduate psychology students working in a position where they serve as role models and mentors to undergraduate students while promoting positive health behaviors. The psychology student interns receive ongoing education and training on wellness topics, including alcohol and other drug use, mental health, stress, sleep, strategies for supporting peers, and more. Interns serve in a position that focuses on a specific set of topics or skills, while also working collaboratively to support the holistic well-being of our community.

In this study, I examined how these student interns developed their leadership and professional skillsets while serving in this new role. Specifically, I explored the ways in which students obtain relevant experiences in college while gaining a better understanding of themselves and type of career/work they find meaningful to them. I also examined how student internship programs are organized and structured to better serve their students while engaging scholars with more meaningful work so they are better able to tailor their higher education experience to their future goals.

Research Question

My positionality as a Graduate Assistant at USD's Center for Health and Wellness Promotion and my personal experiences with undergraduate student internships sparked an interest in student leadership and professional development. When crafting my research question, I intentionally reflected upon and incorporated aspects of my own personal and professional values such as community, leadership, growth and learning. My proposed question I researched was how can educators enhance training programs for student interns to ensure that their leadership development equips them with the skills to build effective relationships, and to better prepare them for their future careers?

Literature Review

For my action research, I focused on reviewing literature that would help me better understand the core philosophy of on-campus internship programs across higher education. By reviewing the literature, I was able to recognize themes that I used to organize my research, which included describing the purpose of on-campus internship programs (Soria & Johnson, 2017), clarifying the relationship between intern and supervisor (Zehr & Korte, 2018), as well as distinguishing factors that enhance student professional and leadership development (Matteo & You, 2020).

Philosophy and Purpose of On-Campus Internship Programs

The philosophy of on-campus internship programs serves a multitude of purposes amongst several groups of people within the systems of higher education, and more specifically, student or academic affairs departments that are student facing.

Student interns not only provide a service to the university, but they also contribute to the program goals and the students they serve. These on-campus internship programs are an example

of a high impact education practice (HIP), which are certain educational activities such as learning communities, undergraduate research, study abroad, etc. HIP's are especially effective in promoting student outcomes because they typically require students to devote a considerable amount of time and effort in the activity (Kuh, 2008). Binder et al. (2015) concluded from their study that there is a correlation between participation in college internships and students' academic outcomes. They also provide students with an opportunity to gain relevant experience while becoming part of the institution and opportunities to have increased interactions with their faculty and peers (Kuh, 2008).

It is increasingly known that in order for college graduates to be competitive for jobs, they need to have some sort of work-based experience within their field. The majority of traditional college students have limited work experience due to a wide range of circumstances. However, employers prefer to seek out students with internship experience compared to students who did not obtain any job relevant and hands on experience (Thompson, 2014). The need for employers to want internship experience has led to the popularity of campus internships for students to build skills and boost their resume. The demand for leadership development programs, such as internship programs, will likely continue to grow (Riggio, 2008).

In a study conducted by Zehr & Korte (2018), students who engaged in internships are able to develop a better understanding of themselves, of others and of their work environment. Another finding from this study was that students were able to talk with researchers about what they learned during their internships, including how to work with others in a group setting. The data from this study also revealed that these internships were able to provide the students with valuable insights into the world of work that they are preparing for.

Relationships between Intern and Supervisor/Advisor

The relationship between supervisor and student is important because it has been shown that one of the most rewarding learning experiences reported by student interns is their positive relationships with their mentors/supervisors/advisors (Zehr & Korte, 2018). In this study they showed that 90% of students who participated in an on-campus internships reported a rating of “good” or “excellent” when they were asked about their relationship with their supervisor/advisor and communication with their supervisor/advisor.

Vianden and Barlow (2015) suggests that relationship management encourages advisors to bond with their students by learning about them and creating lasting relationships with them. It is also known that persistence to graduation is correlated with students having meaningful relationships with faculty and staff (Nunamaker & Cawthon, 2018). Higher education professional, such as I, must take a closer look at the way students build relationships with each other in academic settings. This knowledge can then be used to build programs that encourage conversations around topics that benefit students and their holistic development. Higher education professionals place a lot of importance on college students’ interactions with faculty and the role they play in supporting the students’ personal and social development, as well as their leadership development and university engagement (Astin, 1993). According to Astin (1999), social engagement during college serves as a mechanism for student development and for commitment to college completion.

For many years, leadership research was mostly focused on traits of individual leaders. Leadership researchers then shifted focus to study behaviors associated with effective and ineffective leaders by studying leadership in action and analyzing relationships between leaders and followers (Riggio, Ciulla & Sorenson, 2003). For these reasons, it is vital to study to

relationships between supervisor and intern in order to gain a better understanding of leadership and organizational effectiveness as well as student satisfaction.

Opportunity for professional and leadership development

As previously mentioned, on-campus internship programs provide a multitude of benefits to students, faculty and staff. Hoyle & Deschaine (2016) emphasized that the benefit of student internships is that students develop professionally while gaining necessary leadership skills. In a study conducted by Soria & Johnson (2017), students who participated in an on-campus internship had significantly higher leadership development compared to their peers. Zehr and Korte (2018) concluded from their study that undergraduate student interns benefited from an internship as its design provided them with valuable leadership and various other skills that they can carry over into their professional career. There is a lot of positive evidence that emphasized the benefits to on campus internships; however, there are also concerns and limitations named in the research. For example, the authors realized that students are not successfully making connections between the classroom and the workplace, ultimately making it difficult for them to apply skills learned or acquired in one setting and then applying those same skills in another setting. Due to a lack of student connection between classroom and workplace, it justifies that internships are invaluable because they encourage students to make those connections between skills they learn during their time in the internship and the skillsets needed for the intended career field. The skills that student interns are able to obtain through training and working alongside their peers and staff building interpersonal skills, interviewing skills, conflict resolution, administrative skills, supervising skills, information skills, and leadership development. These skills acquired are made to be transferable and generalized across various career fields when properly tailored to the job objective (Zehr & Korte, 2018).

As emphasized earlier, undergraduate student interns typically receive mentoring and guidance from higher education professionals when training and serving as interns. Previous research has explored broader outcomes beyond student internships. For example, a recent study analyzed undergraduate students' interest in the life and health sciences and found that internship participation improved essential learning outcomes and clarified students' post-graduation goals, (Gilbert et al., 2014). In a study conducted by Matteo and You (2020), when student interns were asked to reflect on their own personal growth, they found they were able to see first-hand how their own training and experiences provided them with the tools to further develop their leadership and other professional skill sets. This is essential to leadership development since research has proven it can be challenging for people to define the concept of leadership as there are many ways a person can conceptualize leadership (Goethals & Sorenson, 2007). This one-on-one guidance from supervisors and mentors can provide students with guidance and education around the concept of leadership.

Many individuals have studied the various systems of higher education in order to better understand ways in which students can obtain meaningful leadership experience outside of the classroom. Gurgol (2019) addressed this issue in a previous action research project that studied student's career readiness and explored ways to maximize on campus employment at the USD. Ultimately, Gurgol (2019) suggested several practices to aid in the development of career readiness of student employees, which included providing detailed feedback from supervisors, creating formal spaces for student employees to connect their on-campus employment with their professional goals, and personal development. Faculty working in student internship programs can provide undergraduate student interns with the opportunity to make meaning of their

experiences, which will lead to the establishment of their leadership and professional development through their on-campus employment or volunteer experience.

To summarize, the literature supports the foundation and purpose of on campus internships as well as the benefits students are able to obtain when serving as a student intern. These benefits include, but are not limited to, the opportunity for enhancing leadership development and the acquiring of professional skills sets such as time management, communication, interpersonal skills, and other skills. From this research, it is obvious students who serve as on-campus interns are able to build relationships with their peers as well as faculty and staff while moving through their own development which can ultimately better prepare them for graduate school or the job market upon graduation.

Methods

Due to the fact that the USD undergraduate student interns that I supervised were the first cohort to enroll in an academic internship through the CHWP, I narrowed down my participant population to my student interns and chose a methodological approach that would best fit their needs and the internship program itself. Therefore, the methodological approach I chose for my action research project is McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) action-reflection cycle (Figure 1). I found value in this methodological approach because the framework supports a systematic approach to problem solving. This method allows the researcher to create an action plan based on the issues or problems that come as a result from the diagnosis that is then evaluated to understand its effectiveness as well as areas of improvement. By utilizing this action research method, I am working from the assumption that the student interns and I both had something to learn from each other, and that knowledge can be used to create effective and positive change for both students and student affairs professionals like myself. The epistemological assumptions and

beliefs driving this project are that the purpose of academic research is to describe, understand, explain, and enact change. Thus, I found value in McNiff and Whitehead (2011) since their framework supports that systematic approach.

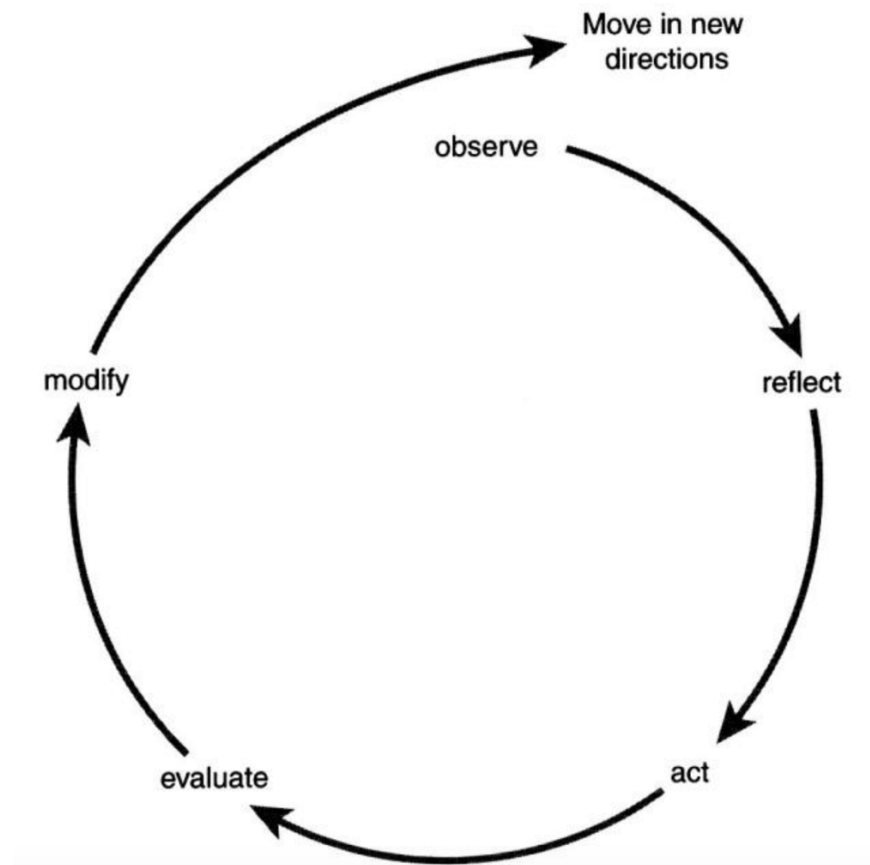


Figure 1. McNiff & Whitehead's (2011) Action-Reflection Cycle.

McNiff and Whitehead (2011) describe an action research method comprised of an action-reflection cycle: this includes an observation, reflection, action, evaluation and modification phase, allowing the researcher to move into new directions and to the next cycle. I am using this as the foundation of my understanding of action research, which has allowed me to consider how I want to engage with the student interns over the course our time together. This

method will enable me to make the necessary changes or additions to the internship program in order to better serve future cohorts by utilizing the findings from my data appropriately.

This action research approach is relevant to my work because it allows me to a) actively engage with student interns, b) make improvements to the internship program as the research is happening, c) gain a better understanding of the student interns development by incorporating their feedback and d) help me become a more effective student affairs professional. For these reasons, this method is most relevant for my action research topic. The listed reasons prior also are strengths in pursuing the research. This framework was valuable for my study because it allowed me to personally connect with each intern who participated in this study through the one-on-one interviews and ongoing supervision of these students. My interrelation with the undergraduates allowed me to take action that was personalized to each student and their future career goals.

Needs Assessment

With the majority of colleges and universities deciding to pivot to fully or partially remote learning this academic year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous students are left with fewer on- campus work opportunities, ultimately preventing undergraduate students from participating in an on-campus internship that could help prepare them for graduate school or to enter the job market upon graduation. As a student affairs advisor to a group of student interns, my role includes the potential to help guide those students as they continue to develop their own leadership and professional skill sets. To this end, I conducted research on how these on-campus internships play a role in a student's leadership and professional development and how the internship ultimately prepares undergraduate students for graduate school and/or their intended career upon graduation.

Cycles

This action research project consisted of three cycles based on McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) action research framework. The first cycle was conducting one-on-one interviews, the second was providing and analyzing journal prompts, and the third was a post internship survey. In the first cycle I conducted individual interviews with each participating intern. The objective of the interview was to obtain information that will shape the future cycles and actions I plan to take. Another aim for these interview cycle was to gain better understanding of areas in which the student interns would want/needed to improve upon in their professional and leadership development.

The second cycle I conducted consisted of providing three journal prompts for each research participant to answer. These journal prompts covered several topics related to leadership and professional development, and each intern was asked to elaborate on their experiences with the internship program and write about areas in which they seem to notice where or where not they are developing.

The final cycle resulted in the distribution of a post internship survey to all participating interns. The purpose of this survey was to provide insight into the student intern experience, and an opportunity to use the students feedback to make further changes to the internship program.

Cycle 1

Observe. I am currently in my first year in my role as the graduate assistant for the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion here at USD. When I first accepted the position, I was told that due to the forced COVID-19 budget cuts I would not be given the opportunity to mentor a group of paid undergraduate student interns. However, a couple of weeks into serving as the graduate assistant, I was approached with an opportunity to advise a group of psychology

undergraduate student interns within our office. I then knew that I wanted to pursue a research topic that I was also passionate about, so I decided to focus on the experiences of student interns and their leadership in professional development. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and USD being mostly remote during this period, I knew that I was going to face difficulties connecting in a meaningful way with each of the student interns, as well as finding new ways to best engage not only with them but with the entire USD community in an accessible and meaningful way. I was new to the role and was helping to design and implement an academic internship program that was relatively new to our office, due to this I wanted to conduct my first cycle as an interview. An interview with each of my interns will give me the insight to gain important information from each participant and better understand their knowledge of what leadership and professional development is to them. This would allow me to obtain important information about themselves and try to meet them where they are at. I conducted this one-on-one interview during the first half of the Fall 2020 semester.

Reflect. In the first cycle, student interns were given the opportunity to participate in the study, and I wanted to start connecting with them more so that I could best understand their needs as student leaders and aspiring professionals. My first cycle took place several weeks after the start of the semester, allowing me to develop a relationship with each of the student interns since I was already working with them on a weekly basis. All four of the student interns that I supervised were very eager to participate in my study and expressed how my research topic was relevant and important to them during this time in their educational and personal development.

Act. I first created a sign up for each participant to utilize when scheduling for the interview. Each one-on-one interview was conducted via Zoom, where I was able to audio record, with their consent, each of the conversations that I had so that I could later on reference

them for data collection. When the interview started, I thanked each participant again for choosing to participate in my research project and encouraged them that this was an informal interview in that I was open to hearing whatever they had to say for each question. Each participant had a total of 30 minutes for each interview but none of them went longer than about 15 minutes. Questions asked during the interview ranged from why they chose to get involved in this specific internship, their specific career goals, and how they understood leadership and professional development, as well as ways they hoped the internship would help in those areas. I provided them with the questions in the chat box on zoom so that they felt more comfortable and were able to reference them. I also gave each participant extra time at the end if they wanted to elaborate on any question they had previously answered or change any answers or add any other comments.

Evaluate. In this cycle I was able to code my qualitative data by using a deductive approach and studying the audio transcripts from the interviews. Based on the previous literature and research done, I picked several codes and overall themes to what I was manually looking for when coding and analyzing my new data from the interview. Despite the small sample size in this cycle and in my overall research, I believe that the responses from these student interns very much aligned with common responses from students who participate in internships as seen from previous literature. This indicates that in the future, a targeted effort can be made to reach students who are participating in an internship across the USD campus as they work on their leadership in professional development.

The participants stated a spectrum of reasons for applying for this specific internship, including wanting to make connections with other students and staff across the USD campus, to be better connected with campus resources, and feeling that the job was compatible for their

future careers. Other responses interns gave regarding the reason to apply for this internship was wanting to continue building their resume toward their career goals. Additionally, they wanted to become more involved on campus and wanted to learn from others. These responses make sense when referencing previous literature such as the study conducted by Hoyle and Deschaine, (2016) and helps us better understand the motivating factors behind why students seek out internships and the benefits that they hope to attain as they continue to start their careers or enter graduate school.

In the second question, I asked students what they were hoping to gain from serving in the position. I asked this question to better understand what motivated them to apply in the first place. Majority of the interns' responses included that they wanted to gain experience towards their future career, as well as to gain more experience working in a virtual setting because of the limitations brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another commonality among several of the participants was that they were hoping this internship could be used as a steppingstone towards a more professional role and as career advancement. A majority of students also expressed that they wanted to be able to connect with their peers as well as staff, and some were hoping to find a mentor during this time. Two students shared that they wanted to improve upon their time management skills. While most of the students expressed that they already had a career plan in mind, one student voiced that she chose the specific internship because she didn't know what her career path was and thought this internship would be helpful since she had experience working with students of other ages but had never had the opportunity to work with college students.

For the question asking what their own interpretation of leadership and professional development, every intern struggled to answer this. Instead of having them answer what

leadership is, they gave their own definition of what a leader was and specific qualities and characteristics that coincided with being a leader. For example, many of the students responded by saying that a leader is somebody who collectively brings people together by inspiring them and working towards some collective goal. Other answers included that leaders are people who lead by example and are willing to take risks as well as somebody that holds power. The students' responses and previous research helps us understand the importance in the relationship between the internship experiences and leadership development by highlighting the common misconceptions or lack of understanding that exists around leadership and what it entails or what it looks like. I resonate with these students' responses to the question because I also had very little understanding of the complexity of leadership and how one practices leadership as an undergraduate student participating in an on-campus internship.

I continued the interview by asking each participant about areas they wish to improve in their own leadership and professional development, and answers varied greatly from student to student. One student's response especially resonated with me as and it reads:

“For me, I think, to improve on my own leadership is making sure I'm not too hard on myself because that might kind of transfer over to other people because I have very high standards that are sometimes unattainable for myself.”

For my final interview question, I asked students to tell me about other opportunities on campus in which they were able to gain some experience in leadership or professional development. All of the students shared with me at least one on campus experience they had that provided these opportunities such as: serving as a Teaching Assistant, being on a committee for a sorority, working in an on-campus job, or serving as a tour guide for prospective students. This is useful information because it shows that these students already have a diverse involvement on

the USD campus and that USD has many opportunities for students outside of internships that aid in their leadership and professional development.

Modify. As I reflect back on this first cycle, I believe it would have been more beneficial for both the participants and I to have given a definition of leadership and professional development, rather than asking them to define these characteristics in their own words. Due to my extensive years of education in leadership I understood that the students didn't share this same knowledge on the subject. Rather than assuming that they had a similar understanding or even closely similar understanding to leadership as my understanding, I should have presented them with the definitions and then asked them to give me examples of leadership. Regardless, I do think their overall struggle to answer those questions is useful data in itself since it allows me to understand the lack of emphasis on leadership that their education has provided. This data helps me tailor the internship and my future research to provide them with a better understanding of what leadership is.

Cycle II

Observe & Reflect. As the semester continued and the interns became more familiar with their role, I moved into the second phase of my research. In this second cycle, student interns were given a journal prompt consisting of three questions that asked the participants:

1. What strengths do you possess as a leader that you are able to utilize in your role as a student intern with the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion?
2. What core values do you hold and how will you exemplify them in your leadership?
3. What does professional development look like to you and how will you hold yourself accountable in maintaining that practice independently?

In creating these questions, I wanted to allow more space and time for the student interns to reflect and elaborate on their experiences with the internship program. These journal prompts encouraged the participants to write about areas in which they seem to notice where they are or are not developing.

Act. I first created the journal prompt questions based on the student interns' previous responses in the one-on-one interviews conducted in the first cycle. They were encouraged to further elaborate on themes found in the coding process during that cycle. I emailed each student intern with a link to the document with the questions and asked them to answer all three prompts to the best of their ability. Students were able to utilize their computers to complete their responses in the form of a Google document, that was then shared with me. Each student intern had a total of three weeks to submit their complete journal responses. Before they began their journal responses, I shared with them that there was no minimum or maximum word requirement, and I wanted them to answer each prompt honestly. Every student completed the journal prompts in the three weeks allotted. The long time period to answer three questions was to allow them time to reflect on each prompt and their experiences in the internship thus far.

Evaluate. In this cycle I used an inductive approach when coding my qualitative data. The students wrote their answers for the journal prompt in a Google document and sent them to me. Once completed, I was able to review each student's answers to find common themes within each question. During this coding process I was able to strategically find themes that related to the previous literature that helped frame and inform my current action research project as I read each student's response to each individual question. I then made note of specific themes I was noticing as I compared the students' responses to each other.

Among the variance in each response there were also several common themes that I was able to identify. Some of the themes included communication as a core value and key characteristic for leadership work, the desire to network and work within a team, and a desire to help serve others through their work in their internship role.

The first journal prompt asked students' what strengths they possess as a leader that they are able to utilize in their role as a student intern with the CHWP. One student stated that communication skills helped them to "reach out and gain new perspectives from different people, [which] has been very beneficial because it allows me to get more information and insight on my ideas I might be forming as well as get feedback to make me better as a leader." Another intern responded to the same question by stating that communication skills were important. Receiving feedback has allowed her to listen to the needs of the USD community, and that "sharing ideas and receiving feedback was important" which allowed her to better "interpret prompts or suggestions given to me by my supervisors in our meetings and deliberate the best move and project direction." Some examples include collaborating with other team members, asking direct questions, vocalizing ideas and thoughts efficiently in order to thrive within the role.

The second question asked students to describe the core values they hold that they can exemplify in their leadership. As I coded the data, I noticed a theme arise from all of the student's responses. All three of the student interns in some way described honesty as an important value that they hold that and are able to exemplify in their leadership. For example, one of the students wrote, "as a leader, I want to make sure that those I work with know they can be honest with me about anything and that this is a safe environment to be themselves and open about what they need or want from me or the situation." Another student shared that honesty was necessary for building trust and loyalty within a group and is what helps make a good role

model. The third student wrote that being able to speak openly and honestly with those around them is necessary for good communication. From the data I realized that honesty was important in both students and supervisors, adding further value to the necessary communication and trust that is needed when working with and building relationships with students.

Undergraduate student interns also shared other core values that they find important for leadership including creativity, respect, and optimism. Reflecting on this, I identified that these core values are important for leadership and were very similar to my own core values. I resonated with much of what participants were sharing in their journal prompt and had reminded me of some of my previous insights from my own experiences as an intern. By analyzing the responses from the student interns, I have gained a further understanding and appreciation for the uniqueness and strengths each individual brings to a group or team and the importance it is to act through one's values, as it is something I also find vital in my personally and professional life.

The final question from the journal prompt asked the participants to explain their own personal definition of professional development, and how they planned to hold themselves accountable in maintaining that practice independently. Majority of the students mentioned the importance of the internship experience for their leadership and professional development, which was the main theme I concluded from the data. For example, one student responded by saying, "I personally like to engage in mentorships and internships to learn from those with more experience and mentoring others with less experience. I prefer hands on engagement and working with others to better improve myself and my resume."

This answer made a lot of sense to me as I felt this way while I was an undergraduate student as well as an aspiring higher education professional; hands on work and experience is extremely useful for leadership and professional development. Previous literature and research

around undergraduate internships highlight the benefits that internships provide students for leadership and professional development and is a large reason why students want that experience on their resume (Riggio, 2008). Another student shared that they work on their leadership and professional development by “applying to a wide variety of jobs, participating in internships to help try out multiple roles, engaging with campus resources (such as the career development center), attending workshops or skill development courses, evaluating personal strengths and weaknesses and how they may relate to specific work opportunities.”

Two of the students also wrote in their responses that it is important to not be too critical of themselves as they continue in their development. Due to the fact that we all work in the CHWP, we spend time brainstorming and creating messaging to share with the USD community around aspects of self-care and maintaining overall wellbeing, and these responses are speaking to the importance of being kind and graceful towards oneself.

Modify. Considering how this second cycle went there are a couple ways I would improve how I conducted this cycle. First, I think it would have been a good idea to explain to the student interns beforehand the importance of journaling and the expectations for how to best respond to journal prompts. This would include sharing with them the importance of taking adequate time for reflection and a word count minimum to encourage them to write more and share more details.

In this cycle I only received three responses instead of the four I originally started with. One of the student interns did not follow up with me when I sent the journal prompts, and never completed the journal questions. I knew there was a possibility of this happening, and that many researchers deal with the issue of attrition in their studies, so I was prepared to see this happen. I also think the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in this particular student from dropping out of

the study. Many students are overwhelmed from spending so much time on a computer or laptop and might have other, more important and pressing matters to deal with and therefore are unable to devote their free time to participating in a research study.

After reflecting on the data further, I realized that I was asking a lot of the student interns during a busy time in their schedule and the semester. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, USD shortened the Fall 2020 semester for undergraduate students, therefore, the student interns were prepping for finals and wrapping up their semester when I conducted this cycle. I then changed the date of when I would conduct cycle III in order to give the interns more time to focus on finals and allow some time afterwards to decompress.

Cycle III

Observe & Reflect. As the semester and internship came to an end, my intention was to conduct a survey that would provide me with feedback including their time in the internship. I was interested in what they felt they had gained during this period, and how they now view themselves as leaders. My third and final cycle involved conducting a survey after the start of the New Year that asked participants an array of questions each with multiple subtopics. I aimed to prompt interns to reflect on their time in the internship while also thinking of ways the internship experience might have changed them or helped them development as a leader and as an aspiring professional upon graduation. I strived to give the interns the opportunity to address previous areas they had commented on such as building their resumes. With all of this in mind, I created a survey that I believed would be useful to evaluate each participants progress and growth. I wanted students to have plenty of time after the semester ended to complete the survey, allowing them time to pass after the end of the internship in order to have optimal time so that they could process their experiences before filling out the survey.

Act. The survey was distributed in the beginning of the Spring 2021 semester, once all of the student interns completed the internship and had a break from school related projects such as this action research project. Due to one intern leaving the study early, I was understanding that the undergraduates were dealing with multiple stress factors including: coping with the pandemic, doing remote learning, and experiencing a shortened semester. Because of this, I wanted to allow plenty of time in between these two cycles so that the students had a moment to pause. I did not want to overwhelm them or pressure them during this time and waited until a couple weeks into the spring 2021 semester to conduct this part of the cycle. Students were sent the Qualtrics survey via email and had two weeks to fill out and complete the survey.

Evaluate. In this last cycle I coded my qualitative survey data by using an inductive approach. I scanned the survey data and looked for common themes and similarities between their responses. By using this approach, I was able to make notes on similarities and differences in the data in order to draw conclusions about the participants' views and feelings for each question that was asked in the survey. Based on these responses, I went back into the literature to see if I could make any more connections that could be important in regard to leadership and professional development as a fiercer result of the internship.

After the coding process, I arrived at several themes that I found to be crucial to understanding college student internships such as the importance of a supervisor/intern relationship and how on campus internships can better prepare students for their intended career or graduate school based on their experiences as a student intern at USD.

The first questions I asked my participants taking the survey was a matrix question. A matrix question allows me to ask several questions with a similar theme in a row that had the same options to respond to (Refer to Appendix D). In this first question I asked each research

participant to answer a set of questions related to their overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the internship in regard to their specific experiences and the opportunities provided to them through the internship.

I asked students to rate their satisfaction with the CHWP internship and its investment in leadership development activities. Interestingly, each student answered differed from one another. As depicted in the table below, one student claimed that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the CHWP internship (Table 1). Another student said they were extremely satisfied with their experience, and the third student answered as somewhat satisfied. They then were asked to rate their satisfaction on their opportunities to apply their talents during the course of the internship. All of the students indicated that they were at least somewhat satisfied with this. The last part of this question prompted participants to rate their satisfaction with opportunities for professional growth in the organization, and students' responses varied similarly to the previous question, which were that they all were at the least somewhat satisfied. I was pleased to see these results, as my goal was to have students leaving the internship feeling at least somewhat satisfied with the internship and the opportunities provided to them throughout their internship. I believe it is the goal of any supervisor or higher education professional, working in a student facing role, to provide students with leadership and professional development opportunities in order to set students up for success beyond graduation.

Statement	Extremely Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
My organizations investment in leadership development activities	1	1	1	0	0

Opportunities to apply my talents and expertise within my organization	1	2	0	0	0
Opportunities for professional growth within my organizations	1	2	0	0	0

Table 1. Responses to Cycle III Survey, Question 1

The second question was also a matrix question and asked each participant to respond to a total of twelve statements and rate the level to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. The statements included aspects of relationships with supervisors, like me, specific skills utilized during the internship, and included statements that reflected how they felt at the end of the internship (Table 2).

The key takeaway from this set of statements and the student responses for question two of the survey was that none of the student interns felt any disagreement towards any of the questions. For every statement, all of the participants at least answered that they somewhat agreed with all of the statements. Another interesting finding was that there weren't many responses of "strongly agree" in the list of statements. Most students, for a majority of the statements, indicated that they "agreed" with the statements. The students' responses to the questions and their relative set of statements helped us see that students enjoyed the internship overall. They all agreed that they would recommend the internship to other USD students in the future.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My supervisors support my overall development	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
My supervisors are dedicated to my professional and leadership development	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
My supervisors played a critical role in ensuring effective leadership development within our organization	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
I feel comfortable asking my supervisors for help if I do not have the skills required to meet my goals within my role	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
I am effective with the detailed aspects of my work	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Managing resources is one of my strengths	0	3	0	0	0	0	0

I am effective at obtaining resources to support our programs	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
I am flexible about making changes in our organization	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
I feel comfortable taking personal accountability and ownership within my organization	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
I feel equipped to manage change and innovation within my organizations	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
I feel better prepared to enter my intended career/graduate school upon graduation based on my experience as a student intern	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
I would recommend this student internship program to other students at USD	0	3	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2. Responses to Cycle III Survey, Question 2

The third question asked participants to rank values they believe are essential to becoming successful in their role as health promotion student intern at USD. The question asked the students to rank these qualities in order from most important to least important (Refer to Appendix D). These included values such as community, success, leadership, achievement, authenticity, compassion, friendship and meaningful work.

The data from this third question was very useful in understanding the values they feel directly relate to their success in their role as a student interns. The most frequently chosen values by participants were authenticity, compassion, community and meaningful work. The least frequently chosen values were success and friendship. One of the surprising findings for me was that the value of leadership did not show up in the four most frequently chosen values. One explanation of this could be that the participants might have seen it as too obvious of a choice since leadership development is what my research is based on.

The fourth and final question in the survey asked participants to choose four out of eight skills that they feel they developed most in as a result of serving as a health promotion intern at USD. These included communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, relationship building, time management, initiative, organization, critical thinking and problem solving, personal work ethic and professionalism (Refer to Appendix D).

For this final question all undergraduate interns answered with communication. Two other participants also choose professionalism and time management. Teamwork, organization, personal work ethic, initiative and critical thinking and problem solving were all chosen once. Emotional intelligence and relationship building were not chosen by any participants.

Modify.

While this was my last cycle, I realize that looking back I would have used the findings from this cycles data to then ask the student interns if they had any other feedback. The survey did not allow space for participants to share with me that they might feel we could have added/changed to the structure of the internship or any other open-ended feedback question.

Summary of Findings

Many themes emerged from this study and I identified several key themes that stood out to me while reflecting on the data. These key concepts include students' desire to get personally and professionally connected to the USD community in a way that boosts their resume and aligns with their values and future intended careers, explanations of their personal understanding and connection to leadership development as well as an understanding of each of their individual internship experience in the CHWP.

In cycle one, students reported that they wanted to participate in an academic internship in order to boost their resumes and better prepare them for their intended careers. They also reported wanting to feel more connected to other students and faculty at the University as well as a desire to help others through their role as a health promotion intern.

An important finding from cycle two was the important of communication in a majority of the participants responses and how that impacts relationships between supervisor and students.

While all of the students struggled to provide an answer for what leadership means to them, it was useful for me to understand as a researcher where they fall in terms of their leadership development and use that information to make the necessary changes to the internship to ensure students leadership and professional development.

The final cycle revealed to us what values each intern holds and what they feel motivates them to participate in a health promotion internship and how they can apply that to their future careers.

Limitations

The most substantial limitation that I faced while conducting this study was the COVID-19 pandemic. This made it very difficult for me to adjust to a new role as a Graduate Assistant in the CHWP having to be onboarded and work remotely. I was not able to immerse myself within the USD community as much as I would have wanted to. During the same time, I was onboarding to my new role, the CHWP found out that we were going to be taking on academic student interns for the Fall 2020 semester, which I would be in charge of supervising. In previous years, the CHWP had student employees that worked in the office but unfortunately due to COVID-19, our office was closed and our team was working remotely. Because of my novelty in this role and the responsibility I had in helping create a new academic internship program with the CHWP, I felt it was best to incorporate the student interns that I worked with into my action research project. Involving the students that I worked with allowed me an opportunity to understand ways that I could improve upon this new internship program while also incorporating my own personal and professional interest in student leadership and professional development. Another limitation was that the sample size was small as my participants are not a holistic representation of all student interns at the USD. My participants were all psychology majors limiting the amount of representation amongst all majors at USD. In future research, I would prioritize a recruitment process that targeted student interns from other majors and departments in order to have a sample size that is more representative of our entire student population.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the CHWP

The first recommendation for the CHWP would be to create an academic or paid internship program that incorporates opportunity for leadership and professional development. This can be an option for all students interested in becoming an undergraduate student intern in the CHWP. It should be the responsibility of the supervisors to inquire about each students' preferences when they apply for the position. Providing students with the option to participate in the internship for either academic credit or for pay allows the student to determine their needs and what would be best for them based on their circumstances.

The final recommendation I have for the CHWP is to provide opportunity to reflect upon each student interns' experiences and ask for feedback at the end of each semester

Recommendations for the Department of Leadership Studies at USD

The Department of Leadership Studies at USD should work to create an internship core curriculum for all programs in the Department of Leadership Studies that outlines specific goals and learning outcomes that all students will have incorporated into their internship or other on campus high impact practices. This ensures that students in the Department of Leadership Studies are each obtaining similar and appropriate leadership and professional development opportunities to help set them up for success upon graduation.

Cross-Collaboration

There should be more collaboration between the career development center and the professional development professionals across all USD's different departments and majors. It is important to utilize resources on campus that are already in place where career development

professionals can become more involved in collaborating with other higher education professionals on campus when working and supervising students in leadership positions.

Recommendations for USD

My first recommendation for USD is to provide all students, regardless of class standing, major or program with the opportunity to engage in an on-campus or USD affiliated leadership and professional development activity for course credit. Many students are not able to engage in any extracurricular activities while in college due to having to work full or part time jobs to help pay for school related expenses. This would allow for students to obtain critical skill sets that can help prepare them to enter their intended career field while simultaneously earning units towards their degree. Implementing this opportunity to all students across USD is critical because we as higher education professionals must commit ourselves to meeting students where they are at in their development. It is important to understand that the stages of development each student goes through during their college years falls along a continuum, and all students fall along this continuum differently, especially between undergraduate and graduate students. By incorporating this internship opportunity across all majors and programs at USD, more students will have the opportunity to engage in a hands-on leadership and professional development experience for academic credit.

My final recommendation for USD is to create a university wide internship office with the organizational goal of connecting students to different internships on and off campus that are relevant to their field of study or intended career. While all students at USD have access to the Career Development Center, having a specific office on campus that is designated to serve students looking to get involved with internships or other relevant hands-on field experiences would be greatly beneficial to the entire USD student population.

Personal Learning

Upon reflecting on the data from my cycles I was curious as to why a majority of the participants in my research lacked a general understanding of leadership and what it entails. I concluded that I had a different connection to leadership within the CHWP compared to the student interns. During my first semester of graduate school, I experienced challenges with my mental health and was able to seek counseling services from USD. After seeking counseling through the Counseling Center at USD, I had a deeper and more personal connection to the CHWP and a passion for understanding leadership as I worked towards my master's degree in Higher Education Leadership. I now understand that I have developed a better understanding and personal connection to leadership. I projected on to the student interns and assumed that they had a similar understanding of leadership or a similar personal connection to the CHWP.

One major takeaway from this study for me was the importance of relationships in leadership development and overall student success. As seen from the data, student interns who reported having a positive relationship with their supervisor were overall more satisfied with the internship. I resonate with this and believe my overall success as a graduate student and employee of the CHWP is partly due to the meaningful relationships I hold with my current supervisors. Throughout my graduate program I struggled with my mental health and had concerns and doubts on whether or not I could be an effective leader because of my mental health. My supervisors and over CHWP team created a work environment that encouraged me to care for myself while also providing me with support during my own development. This has made me a better leader and encourages me to continue to build relationships with students while utilizing their feedback to make the changes needed to address their holistic needs.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of my research, I was able to work alongside the student interns at the CHWP at USD and study their development as leaders and professionals. By the utilization of one-on-one interviews, journal prompts and surveys, I was able to examine the ways in which these students grew in their leadership skills. I was also able to analyze which aspects of their student internships contributed the most to their development. Some of these facts included mentorship and teamwork. Students who reported having positive experiences with their mentors were more satisfied with their overall experience as a CHWP intern. Additionally, the students who reported the most growth in their leadership skills, such as communication with teammates, also had a higher overall satisfaction with the internship program. Each intern stated that they saw the most growth in the communication related skillsets. The key themes that were identified in my study were the student's desire to connect personally and professionally with the USD community and the desire to boost their resumes and connect their values with their intended future careers. While my study had limitations involving samples size and complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe there is a strong correlation between students' leadership and personal development, and their internships opportunities and experiences. By implementing more internship opportunities across campus and committing to providing scholars with a more enriched leadership and professional development experience, USD can strive to be a university that better prepares their students for a successful career after graduation.

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Appendix A

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Professional and Leadership Development Amongst Student Interns

I. Purpose of the research study

Amanda Brown is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is understanding how internship programs aid in the professional and leadership development of student interns.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

Engage in 3 cycles of research. The first cycle will include a one on one interview with me which will be online, via zoom and audio recorded. This interview will consist of 5 questions about your previous leadership experience and what you hope to gain from serving in the role. The second cycle will include 3 journal prompts that I will ask you to answer and submit to me online. These prompts will ask you to write about your strengths and values as a leader and how you view professional development. The 3rd and final cycle will be a survey that I will ask you to complete online at the end of your internship. This survey consists of 3 questions with multiple parts for each that ask you about your experiences as a student intern, what you have learned and what you will take with you after.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 360 minutes/ 6 hours over the course of 11 weeks.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how to better prepare students for graduate school or their intended career by providing them with the tools to develop professionally as well as confidence in their leadership capabilities.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Amanda Brown

Email: asbrown@sandiego.edu

2) David Karp

Email: dkarp@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix B

Interview Questions Cycle 1

1. Please describe the reason or reasons why you decided to apply to be a student intern for the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion.
2. What are you hoping to gain from serving in this position?
3. In your own words, please provide a definition for the term leadership and professional development.
4. In what areas do you wish to improve upon your own leadership and professional skill sets?
5. Are there other opportunities on campus where you were able to gain some experience in leadership and/or professional development? If so, please explain how that impacted you. If not, please explain why that is and how you feel about it.

Appendix C

Journal Prompt Questions

1. What strengths do you possess as a leader that you are able to utilize in your role as a student intern with the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion?
2. What core values do you hold and how will you exemplify them in your leadership?
3. What does professional development look like to you and how will you hold yourself accountable in maintaining that practice independently?

Appendix D

Cycle III Survey

Q1 Please respond to each statement below and rate the level to which you are dissatisfied or satisfied

	Extremely satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Extremely dissatisfied
My organization's investment in leadership development activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opportunities to apply my talents and expertise within my organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opportunities for professional growth within my organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q2 Please respond to each statement below and rate the level to which you agree or disagree

[illegible]

I am effective
at obtaining
resources to
support our
programs

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I am flexible
about making
changes in our
organization

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I feel
comfortable
taking personal
accountability
and ownership
within my
organization

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I feel equipped
to manage
change &
innovation
within my
organization

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I feel better
prepared to
enter my
intended
career/graduate
school upon
graduation
based on my
experience as a
student intern

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I would
recommend
this student
internship
program to
other students
at USD

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Q3 Please rank in order from most important to least important the values that you believe are the most essential for success in your role as a health promotion intern. The value you rank as

"1" is the value that you consider to be the most important, the value you rank as "8" is the value that you consider the least important.

_____ achievement

_____ authenticity

_____ community

_____ compassion

_____ friendship

_____ leadership

_____ meaningful work

_____ success

Q4 From the list below, please choose the 4 skills you developed most as a result as serving as a health promotion student intern

- ☐ communication
- ☐ teamwork
- ☐ time management
- ☐ organization
- ☐ personal work ethic
- ☐ emotional intelligence
- ☐ relationship building
- ☐ initiative
- ☐ critical thinking & problem solving
- ☐ professionalism